

FINE GRANULAR BITS
'RICE' AND 'GRAIN' IN HMONG-MIEN¹

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My initial interest in words for 'rice' in Hmong-Mien came as part of a study I made several years ago of linguistic archaisms in White Hmong traditional literature (Ratliff 1988). Some demonstrably archaic words, like that for 'snow', 'water', and 'mountain',² occur only in traditional texts (both religious and secular), and frozen quadrisyllabic expressions, having been supplanted by other roots in everyday usage. I noted then that the most widespread family word for 'cooked rice', PHm *h̄on/PM *hnaŋ C,³ is not commonly used with that meaning in White Hmong. The expected reflex for this word in White Hmong is *hno*,⁴ but it has been supplanted in White Hmong by *mov* except in traditional language referring to feasting:

common quadrisyllabics (AB₁AB₂)

hno nplej hno nplaum

cooked rice/rice/cooked rice/sticky rice (= food)

noj-nqaij noj-hnos

eat/meat/eat/cooked rice

quadrisyllabics in ritual language

(from Laig Dab Peb Caug ceremony)

laig nqaij laig hno

offer the spirits/meat/offer/cooked rice

An explanation for the displacement of *hno* may be found by examining all the words that belong to the semantic field 'rice' in Hmong-Mien. As David Strecker discovered (1987), what we find in Hmong-Mien may be the lexical equivalent of the Great Vowel Shift or, a more Asian analogy, the Amoy tone cycle: a set of semantically related roots and their referents have demonstrated an independence from each other by virtue of their ability to detach and reconnect in a systematic way. The intent of this brief paper is to bring this material which David Strecker brought to my attention to the attention of other Southeast Asian specialists in turn, and to add a comment on the connection of this set of roots to 'grain/millet'.

Strecker's hypothesis is as follows:

<u>Proto-Hmong-Mien</u>	<u>Hmongic dialects</u>
* mb læ/* mb ləu A rice plants	rice plants, <u>unhusked rice</u>
* tshan B/* tshuk D <u>unhusked rice</u>	<u>husked, uncooked rice</u>
(* m -)/* hmei B <u>husked, uncooked rice</u>	<u>cooked rice, food</u>
* ḥon /* hnaŋ C <u>cooked rice, food</u>	(cooked rice, food)

"The forms and meanings are well preserved, by and large, in Mienic . . . In Hmongic, insofar as these words exist at all, they have undergone a curious semantic shift. [***mb**læ] still means 'rice plants' but also moves down a notch to mean 'unhusked rice grains' as well. Then [***tshan**] moves down a notch to mean 'husked but uncooked rice'. And finally, then, [***hmei**] . . . moves down a notch to mean 'cooked rice', coming into competition with [***ḥon**]." (Strecker 1987: 1) The effect of these linked changes was what I encountered in my work with White Hmong, in which *hno* 'cooked rice' plays only a marginal role.

A re-examination of Strecker's sources (and an examination of a few others) finds confirmation of his hypothesis, but also some glosses which suggest a slightly different historical development in two respects. All four roots are widely distributed in the family:

* mb l-	Yanghao na A, Jiwei nu A, Xianjin mple A
W#34/4	Shimen ndli A, Qinyan mpla A, Gaopo/
tone: 2 (A2)	Zhongdi mplæ A, Bunu ntie A, Ho Ne pja
cf. MC d'ao	A; Mien bjau A, Mun (Hainan) blaο A, Mun
	(Houei Sai) blau A
	(all either growing/unhusked rice)

*tsh-	Yanghao shɛ B (husked rice), Jiwei sɛ B (porridge), Xianjin tsho B (millet), Shimen tshu B (millet), Qinyan/Zhongdi soŋ B, Gaopo shəŋ B, Fuyuan tshəŋ B, Fengxiang ɕoŋ B (all husked rice); (Chang 1976 lists Hmongic forms and glosses all 'a kind of grain');
W#38/23 tone: 3 (B1)	
tone: 7 (D1)	Mien tshu+ D, Mun (Haininh) t«su D (both: unhusked rice grains), Mun (Hainan) t'juu D (uu < u+) (grain/millet)

*'m-	White/Green Hmong mɔ B (cooked rice/meal)
Purnell 724 tone: 3 (B1)	Mien mei B, Mun (Haininh/Hainan/Houei Sai) mei B (both: husked rice)

*'v-	Xianjin na C, Qinyan noŋ C, Gaopo nhon C, Zhongdi no C, Fengxiang nhəŋ C; Mien na:ŋ C, Mun (Hainan) naŋ C (Houei Sai) na:ŋ C, Biao Min hnaŋ C, Dzaio Min noŋ C (all cooked rice/meal)
W#60/25 tone: 5 (C1)	

The meanings for the roots on the two sides of the family may be summarized as follows:

	<u>Mienic</u>	<u>Hmongic</u>
*mblæ/*mbləu A	growing rice; unhusked rice	growing rice; unhusked rice
*tshan B/*tshuk D	unhusked rice; grain	husked rice (> millet, porridge)
(*m-)/*hmei B	husked rice	cooked rice; food
*ŋon/*hnaŋ C	cooked rice, food	(cooked rice; food)

which leads me to the following observations:

1. No evidence was found that ***mb**læ/***mb**ləu A means 'rice plants' to the exclusion of 'unhusked rice grains' in any source; there is therefore no confirmation of the first semantic shift hypothesized by Strecker.

2. Given the glosses involving 'grain', 'millet' and 'porridge', ***t**shan B/***t**shuk D may not originally have been of this set. If it was originally 'grain', specialization from 'grain' to 'rice' evolved in two different ways in the two main branches:

Mienic:	grain > unhusked rice
Hmongic:	grain > husked rice

Therefore, semantic specialization has taken place in Mienic, with no other disruption of the PHmM form-meaning alignments. Semantic specialization was followed by displacement of (***m**-)/***hmei** B form in Hmongic, which in turn displaced the ***ŋon**/***hnaŋ** C form in some West Hmongic dialects (a semantic push chain, as Strecker suggests).

The process of semantic change reflected in this data would have to have involved a period when the items in question had broad reference to encompass two "adjacent" meanings of rice, as is the case today in all of the modern reflexes of the first root, which can be used to refer to both the growing rice plant and to unhusked rice grains. This was undoubtedly facilitated by compounds of the type Chinese **mǐ-fàn** 'husked rice-cooked rice' = 'cooked rice' and Hainan Mun **t'juu-mei** 'grain-hulled rice' = 'food', which provided a transition environment.

Notes

¹I am grateful to both Paul Benedict and Laurent Sagart for giving me information which has led me to excise my discussion of the words for 'snow' (PHm ***mp**an C) and 'flour' (PHm ***mp**an B), the subject of the first half of this paper in its original version. At the time of SEALS III, I had postulated a C-tone derivation process to account for the 'snow' etymon in Hmong-Mien, which is otherwise homophonous with the B-tone word for 'flour'. Both Benedict (p.c.) and Sagart (1994) see 'flour' as a loan from the Chinese root ***p**iwən meaning ('husked'>) 'powder/flour' (GSR 471d). Sagart believes